

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 24 – Terak Invasion

“Louelle had told them tales, about her race once being numerous. Used as warriors by the human rulers of the rifts, long before the old Gods had perished or gone into hiding. She’d told them of battles between vast armies, tales of slaughter on a vast scale.”

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Tejan was a member of The Damned, with a great deal of experience. She’d been selected in the old way, before anyone had thought of an annual intake. Minraver herself had visited her home world, with tales of her being one of the chosen. Her name had been Tejan even then. It was an old family name and she’d chosen to keep it. There had never been any hint of her being selected for the elite, though she didn’t resent that. She enjoyed the cards life had dealt her, they were far better ones than most can hope for. She was wealthy, had a beautiful home on the shores of the southern ocean and instant respect, wherever she went in the empire. Life was good and for every person at the front of the parade, there had to be a hundred marching behind them. Tejan was happy to be a foot soldier of the imperial guard. Her current assignment was strange, but she never questioned orders, ever.

“Dress as a senior cleric and watch without being seen.” She’d been told. “Seb the boatman and his mother might not be what they seem. Be careful Tejan, no heroics.”

Tejan felt like reminding her squad commander that she’d fought in at least a dozen major battles and had been seriously injured in two of them. As usual Tejan had merely acknowledged her orders, determined to carry out all orders to the full. She had her constant mental link to Chlo of course, rolling through the back of her mind and usually ignored.

“I’m outside their home Chlo. What sort of strange behaviour am I looking for?”

“No one is sure, though the request for surveillance did come from Minraver herself. Watch the house and keep changing your clothing. It’s on a busy street, so you shouldn’t be noticed. Don’t enter the house or talk to either of them.....Understood?”

“Yes, of course Chlo.”

So, trudge about and look for anything odd. It didn’t seem much of an assignment and Tejan suspected that Chlo had no real idea about Minraver’s suspicions. There was a street food seller, cooking simple food and Tejan was hungry.

“Are the Carocakes fresh?” She asked.

It was all a ritual, as was haggling the price down a little. She bought two of the sweet cakes, which made ideal breakfast food. It gave her an opportunity to sit on a wall and observe the house. Seb and his mother were clerics, descendants of generations of Menderan Citizens. They’d be paid the not inconsiderable monthly dividend, simply for being citizens of the empire. Traders from unaligned worlds and migrant workers might not keep their city registration details up to date, but citizens did. Tejan looked them up on the city register.

Sebennial Xyobraxis – Citizen Cleric

Molynbennial Xyobraxis – Citizen Cleric

No pictures on the registry, but Chlo kept pictures of just about everyone. Easy for Tejan to have pictures, to go with the names. Xyobraxis was an old cleric second name. The honorary name, Bennial had been granted with the awards, given out to all clerics who had witnessed the last arrival

of the Gods into Mendera City. Most families had given up using the name, but obviously Seb's people hadn't. Break away all the nonsense and you were left with Seb and Moly, his mom.

"Why does a rich citizen become a lowly boatman?" She muttered.

Many citizens carried out public service roles, for little pay or even no pay at all. That was their choice though and there was nearly always some kind of status involved. Clerics were always looking for ways to gain status. Some were totally obsessed with their position in society.

"Boatmen have no status Seb..... So why?"

He left for his self-imposed lowly profession, when she was halfway through her second Carocake. Seb left by the door almost in front of her, smiling at the street food vendor, before walking away.

The assignment might be over that night, or Seb might be next week's most wanted person. Either way, Tejan carefully noted everything about the man walking up the street, adding it all to his file.

Seb would be home for lunch, according to the information Chlo had given her. He'd work a short afternoon shift, to be home for an early evening meal with his mother. All that hard work to earn a wage about a twentieth of the citizenship dividend, which arrived in his bank every month.

"It doesn't make sense, but it's not illegal."

She walked down an alley and then back towards the house. The main entrance was out onto the lake, although the public hire boats were banned from using the local jetties. Seb and his mother had their own boat tied up at the jetty. Not the latest model, but expensive and luxurious. They certainly weren't leading a life of poverty. The morning sun reflected off the house windows, making a quick look inside impossible. As she turned into another alley, Tejan shimmered slightly and her orange themed clothes, became light green themed clothing. To all but the most observant, she'd now be a different woman.

"Chlo; can you give me access to your probes inside their house?" She asked.

A slight delay in replying, which was rare. A few other members of the guard had mentioned something similar. It was being put down to Chlo being busy with the war. It was vaguely disquieting that anything could slow down the near legendary Chlo. Her answer was just as disquieting.

"I have no probes inside their house." Said Chlo. "There is surveillance blocking, that could be breached, but that would be noticed. Stay outside for now and keep walking a regular pattern of patrols."

That was unheard of... Someone with the ability to block Chlo in Mendera City. Tejan began to take the mission far more seriously. The fast food vendor had gone, by the time she was walking past that side of the house again. Sellers of food followed the footfall and he was probably on his way to the places pilgrims tended to congregate. There was a shop just opening up, their window giving a clear view of the mystery house. There was only so long she could pretend to be interested in wrought iron furniture, but it was better than constantly walking a figure of eight around the block. Tejan was almost inside the shop, when she heard a door open.

Moly was leaving the house. Tejan could see her clearly, reflected in the shop window. The old lady was looking away from her, before leaving her front door ajar and walking towards the house next door. Calling on someone? Borrowing something from a neighbour? So many possibilities, but no time to think them all through. No one leaves their front door open, unless they don't intend to be out for long. Tejan made sure no one was likely to see her, before rushing across the street and into the house.

"Fair Estrid, please don't let this be a trap." She muttered.

It looked so ordinary, though a little too opulent for most clerics. Expensive furnishings and fabrics, though Tejan didn't have the time to simply enjoy her surroundings. She could hear the old lady,

talking to one of her neighbours. Tejan went upstairs, crouching beside the top of the stairs, in a spot where she could just see the open front door.

“No, I heard they’d stopped selling them too..... I have everything, just need to close my door..... Think how jealous Pia will be.....”

She wasn’t coming back into the house. Moly was obviously going shopping, for something rare and sought after. Or at least sought after by the unknown Pia. It was the perfect opportunity to explore the entire house.

“I’m inside Chlo..... Chlo ?”

Damn, Chlo really did seem to be completely blocked by something. It also meant no reinforcements, unless they were allowed to batter the door down. Still, she was there, inside the home of Seb and his mom.

“I might as well start with the bedrooms.” She muttered.

“Downstairs Tejan.” A voice shouted. “You might as well join me for breakfast.”

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Hy Astar’s life had been that of a typical warrior. He’d played hard to alleviate the boredom, which filled the gaps between periods of stupid risks and outright terror. Only then there had been the hero persona constantly playing in his head. Now he felt ordinary and that depressed him. He was a professional though and loyal to the empire. If The Chalné wanted him to be ambassador to Algaria, he’d do the job to the best of his abilities. Being in the company of Minraver was hardly a chore either, though he still wasn’t sure about the kids.

“We’re landing.” He said.

The shuttle had superb inertial damping, only the view screen gave any idea that they were rushing towards the main spaceport of Tranquillity. They seemed to be at about two thousand feet, vast areas of housing, rushing past below.

“Seesha, Mix.” Said Minraver. “Stay near me and remember that all young clerics will be judged by your behaviour.”

He had to give a huge sigh, even if it did earn him a disapproving look.

“They’re kids, a long way from home.” He said. “Lighten up on them a little.”

Mix held his left hand, while Seesha held his right. Minraver looked surprised, as though not realising what had just happened. The eternal didn’t have children of course, but Sikush was good with kids.

“Fine, stay close to Hy if you like.... Just behave.” Said Minraver.

“We will.” Said Seesha.

Hy didn’t open the outside door, until the welcome committee looked to be in place. Several fed up looking Genova, abandoned by Minraver were there. A few senior spaceport staff made up the bulk of the Algerian meet and greet party, along with a minor government minister. Marius was there too of course, accompanied by a woman who was probably his wife.

“I think they’re ready.” Said Hy.

It wasn’t much of a welcome, but it had been meant well and Algaria wasn’t famed as a planet, for their diplomatic skills. The kids tightened their grip on his hands, as Hy walked towards the face he’d been seeing all over the news broadcasts.

“Marius, good to finally meet you.” Said Hy. “I brought a little unintended company... We have two stowaways, who’d like to join us for lunch.”

Seesha gave a slight bow, while Mix just stood there, mouth wide open.

“Are you really..... The Marius ?” He asked.

“He is..... Though our kids just call him pop.” Said the woman.

Formal introductions followed, where they learned that Marius's wife was called Antonia, though he called her Aen. No one was believing the truth about the kids. Minraver abandoned her angels again, while Hy deliberately didn't invite the Algarian minister to lunch.

"A bit rude I suppose, especially as they're paying the bill." He joked.

Plenty of room in the government vehicle, without all the hangers on, who seem to latch onto such events. The driver said the restaurant was good and even saw them inside. They were known of course, lots of heads turning to watch, as they were seated at the best table in the house.

"So, truth now." Said Antonia. "Why did you bring this delightful pair of children, all the way to Algaria."

"We hid." Said Mix. "Really....For hours."

"Forgive the deception." Said Minraver. "There was a mix up with my timings and I was late picking up Seesha & Mix. I hope you don't mind their company?"

"Not at all.... But who do they belong to?" Asked Marius.

Eyes turning his way, though Hy hoped he looked too young to have fathered Seesha. Again, Minraver had a tale to tell, lying with far more expertise than he'd anticipated.

"The offspring of dear friends in the temple." Said Minraver. "The clerics newly given permission to leave the temple and explore the city. I thought a little impromptu visit to Algaria might aid their education."

"Oh, those children." Said Antonia. "We saw the announcement... Poor things. They really haven't left the temple before?"

"Never." Said Mix, in a manner that forbade disbelief.

"Then we must show you all the best Tranquillity has to offer." Said Marius. "We've had a few....erm problems lately. But there are still a lot of places you'll enjoy. You must see the monster of course."

"See the monster.... Yay!" Yelled Mix.

"What is it?" Asked Seesha.

"No one knows, that's what makes it so special." Said Marius.

Hy had been to see the monster, when he hadn't been much older than Mix. It was dead, a long petrified set of bones. No one spoiled it for children, by telling them that fact. Found deep in a mine, the ancient remains of a truly massive creature, were still the number one attraction in the entire empire.

"It is over three hundred feet long." Said Marius. "With a dozen legs, two dozen arms and wings.... Huge wings."

"You're making it up." Said Mix.

"No, I promise you young Mix." Said Marius. "Horns too, big enough to skewer a dozen grown men.... Hy will back me up."

"I will.... Saw the beast when I was about your age Mix. The wings scared me the most."

"Wow!" Yelled Mix.

"Everyone has been so kind." Said Seesha. "Hol told us people outside the temple could be kind."

"Who is Hol?" Asked Antonia.

"The Chief Cleric to The Temple of the Flame, though now involved in other duties." Said Minraver.

"This damn war." Said Antonia. "I hope she's safe, wherever she might be."

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Safe wasn't the feeling uppermost in Hol's mind. Once they'd been given a chance to tidy up and obtain some new equipment, Aelfraed had sent a servant to fetch them. Everyone had been so friendly, treating them like conquering heroes. The demon invoker in charge of the main armoury,

had even talked about how much they owed Mendera for coming to help in the war against the Terak.

"They do realise we're it, don't they?" Celli had asked. "The entire relief unit sent from Mendera." Albas swung his sword through the air, before grinning at Celli.

"Well we can be fairly formidable.... On a good day." He said.

It continued, the smiling happy faces, as they were taken through different areas of the imperial palace.

"This is where Mighty Neosto, may his memory live forever, once held court."

Their guide told them. Hol had imagined being escorted about by scowling guards. The happy people were a surprise, everything was a surprise. If there was one feeling uppermost in her mind, it wasn't being safe, it was being surprised. Eventually they were shown into a side room, being used by Aelfraed as a war room.

"Hol, so good to see you."

Aelfraed actually hugging her, like some long lost family member. Before she could comment, Aelfraed was greeting each of her group, taking time to have a few words with each of them. They were all excited, apart from Mingal, who was still looking around in awe.

"This feelsLike home." He said. "I'm so glad we came here."

"I want you all to feel welcome here." Said Aelfraed. "Once I official become the new Empress of Leng, I intend to grant you all some proper rewards. Bringing Kittara back will achieve more in the long term, than anything we're likely to achieve in Leng. I have a city to defend though and you've arrived at just the right moment. The Terak are advancing across the 7th rift and will be here in a matter of hours."

Hol wasn't sure if Aelfraed was expecting them to arrive with a mighty army, or she was assuming Hol was a mighty holy warrior of some kind.

"We will of course fight to the death if necessary, but we are the warriors sent by Mendera." She said. "Just us I'm afraid."

"And we're only here because Hol went rogue." Added Celli.

Aelfraed was quite small and there was a slight feeling of darkness about her. She was still smiling at them, as though Hol had just told her a mighty army was on the way.

"Of course, you don't know." Said Aelfraed. "The link to Mendera City has been difficult to maintain and often garbled, but it still works. Sikush has agreed to send us his reserves. We're not sure of exact numbers, but there was talk about tens of thousands."

Hol felt the feeling of hollowness, that often arrives in the company of dread. Mendera had reserves, probably tens of thousands, permanently garrisoned on the outer worlds. Sikush promising them to Leng seemed unlikely, as did a permanent link of some kind with Leng.

"Are you sure it's not our enemy talking to you?" She asked.

"I know a link to Sikush when I see it. We may not have sentinels in Leng, but my seers would spot a deception of that kind, as would I."

"How are they getting here?" Asked Juno.

There was that smile again, as if someone had drugged Aelfraed.

"The heat of the 7th rift has often been our protector, but it can make a difficult road for allies. Sikush is going to open a vast door, a portal right through to the Well of Souls."

"That sounds wonderful, but perhaps a little strange." Said Mingal.

"You've all obviously been affected by the old watcher." Said Aelfraed. "I can understand a few of my own generals expecting some kind of trap.... But never the warriors of Mendera. There is a

favour I would ask, that will put you in a good position to witness the arrival of The Damned into Leng.”

“Name it and it shall be done.” Said Hol.

“I fear the Terak may try and destroy this palace from above, probably by fire. It is an old building, but there is a lot of emotional attachment to it, by the people of Leng. I’d be grateful if you could help patrol the various sections of roof.... Repel the invaders Hol... Stop them burning my palace.”

“Just show us the way up there.” Said Hol.

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Louelle had turned out to be an eccentric creature, with her own set of values. Like the others, Rhian had learned it was easier to go along with her plans, than to argue with her.

“Pug, your beast is the key to this plan.” Said Louelle. “His value to the tribespeople is now greater than his weight in gold. He’s cost the lives of their people, their blood.”

“Will he obey her though, when it matters ?” Asked Silky.

“He will, I’m sure of it.” Said Rhian.

“The damn brute tries to follow her everywhere.” Added Kerr.

They were going to do it. They were actually going to carry out Louelle’s insane plan, to gain them an extra hundred or so defenders for the fortress. They were all at the ruined gateway, the entrance to the old demon hill fort. Louelle saw further than them, constantly peering into the distance.

“There are more of them than I anticipated.” Said Louelle. “At least a hundred, maybe twice that number. They have called upon their kin among the other tribes. This is good, very good.”

Mo had been quite talkative, until they were at the entrance to the fortress, about to put the plan into action. Rhian was feeling nervous too. She was the one with the job of leading Pug, down the trail and into a large group of angry tribespeople.

“You really can’t expect us to face that many,” said Mo, “while bound by an oath not to kill any of them.”

“We’ll need to protect Rhian.” Said Silky. “You need to allow us to use our.... Skills.”

Louelle had told them tales, about her race once being numerous. Used as warriors by the human rulers of the rifts, long before the old Gods had perished or gone into hiding. She’d told them of battles between vast armies, tales of slaughter on a vast scale. Yet she had extracted a promise out of them all. Her help came with a price. No more of the tribespeople could die by their hand.

“I was perhaps a little hasty in extracting that promise.” Said Louelle. “To save the life of yourself or one of your friends... Then yes, I accept that you may need to kill.”

“Good, that makes me feel much better.” Said Mo.

Louelle ignored Mo, turning towards Silky, actually glaring at her.

“No feeding on them though !” She snapped. “I can keep these people of the rift under my control, but not if they see you feeding on their dead. You’ll need to live on rock croppers, until the battle is won, or we’re all dead.”

“We might catch the occasional Shuud.” Said Mo.

Poor silky, her face showed the disappointment. She’d been hoping for a feast of fresh meat, only to be told to expect gruel. No Shuud was ever going to satisfy her, even if they found one.

“Very well, I give my word to only kill as a last resort.” Said Silky.

“And no feeding.” Said Louelle.

“Yes, yes... Though it seems a ridiculous waste. I promise to allow the tribespeople to bury their dead with all the usual rites and rituals. I will not feed on any.”

“Good, we can now begin.”

All eyes on her, as Rhian patted Pug a few times and rubbed the area of fur between his eyes. For once their furry beast was quiet and looked content. She actually kissed his head, getting the full force of his rather unpleasant odour.

“Come on Pug, we’re going to meet some old friends of yours.” She said.

There was a rope around his neck, but pulling on that was a last resort. At the moment Pug seemed happy to follow her, out of the gateway and down the pathway. How would he react to a hundred, or so angry people of the rift? That was unknown, but his reaction was likely to be violent and unfriendly. Rhian stroked the top of his head.

“Be good Pug, but stomp on anyone who tries to attack me.”

He bellowed, but probably at the flies circling his head. Rhian picked up the pace a little, Pug following her and bellowing as he walked.

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Estrid was so tempted to simply stop the vast engine, which filled the core of Boomers. So easy to simply reach out with her almost limitless power and stop the artificial core of the planet, from turning. Instant death to anyone on the planet of course, or in orbit around it. Meddling with those kinds of forces had consequences. Most of which she didn’t understand and couldn’t accurately predict. Her knowledge wasn’t even total about her own multiverse and she knew nothing about past or future worlds.

“The sad thing is that I have all these powers.” She said. “Yet I’m not omniscient or even well informed, when it comes to matters like this.”

“The curse of the Gods is what Sikush calls it.” Said Chlo. “For the multiverse to survive, the Gods need to be limited. The act of imposing limits, means that the real battles, the ones that matter, are always fought by others.”

“Crap!” Yelled Sventa. “Luri won the last great battle of the deities. She did it with help from Tomma-Goran and a few tricks he’d taught me.”

“I can’t argue with you Sventa.... I have so few memories of that time.” Said Chlo. “I do know that stopping the vast engine inside Boomers will prevent our enemies from ending this multiverse.”

“Then let me stop it.” Said Estrid.

Chlo came and stood next to her, as they both watched the planet’s core, slowly turn beneath them. There was a similar planet sized engine, rotating beneath the surface of Sessana. Everyone had been patient, giving Chlo and her tech-clerics an opportunity to study the technology.

“Nothing is certain, but the resulting destruction is quite likely to accomplish what our enemy wishes. Stop the engine in this multiverse and there will be an effect, like stretching elastic until it snaps. The only safe way is to stop the engines on the other side, in the other multiverse.”

“Isn’t that what Delmus is probably doing?” Asked Estrid.

“Probably, he did take his beloved RM9 and we all know Delmus.” Said Sventa.

“Good to know he should be safe.” Said Estrid.

“By safe, I meant safe for our multiverse.” Said Chlo. “The local effect in the other world will be devastating. Delmus has no specific orders to destroy the enemy engine over there, but as has been said.... We all know Delmus. There is a real chance though, that he won’t survive the resulting implosion of time and space.”

Estrid knew how Luri felt about Delmus, the real love they’d shared for so long. Luri might be a dark goddess, but they’d always managed to keep a friendship going, of a sort.

“Then we must travel to the other engine attached to the core of Boomers.” Said Estrid. “If Delmus is risking his life, I feel we should be making more of an effort.”

“Destroying one engine should be enough.” Said Chlo.

“Should be..... Are you certain Chlo ?”

“No, not completely certain.”

Estrid had a need to make a grand gesture. It was true that the deities hadn't played a huge part in the last battle between light and dark. There had been several galaxy destroying actions between individual Gods, but nothing that had moved the balance of the multiverse, even slightly. Even the defeat of Sevril-Narge had been largely due to Luri, before her change into a God. Sveta had been with her of course, dragging her back out of the wastes.

“I will take Luri with me, she never can resist a fight.” Said Estrid. “Sveta can come too and Haan, who seems to follow her everywhere. We'll find the other world connected to Boomers and rip it apart.”

“How will we get there ?” Asked Sveta. “There is only one Grey Walker.”

“Luri's Lummel, the rift walkers.” Said Estrid. “If they can cross the void between the worlds of light and dark, their craft can travel anywhere. They worship Luri and will take her wherever she wishes to go.”

“Gods or not, you might not survive.” Said Chlo.

Estrid looked at Sveta, catching the slight nod and the savage look in her eye.

“I've always wanted to travel with the Lummel.” Said Sveta.

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They'd been attacked a few more times, usually during the times when Delmus had allowed them to rest. Always a human in an atmosphere suit, always useless with weapons and easily dealt with. The fireball below them had been a surprising escalation in the battle with their unidentified enemy. Even Delmus had looked concerned, as the wave of super-heated air had gone past them, travelling upward at some speed. Dava found herself looking towards Delmus for an explanation, as had the others.

“I'm guessing we'll find the lower hundred feet of stairs are no longer there.” Delmus had told them.

“There might be other tricks and traps too.”

“They've had a while to prepare.” Said Trey.

They were now all clustered together on the last stable platform on the staircase. Eighty feet from the ground below rather than a hundred, but still a fatal drop for most lifeforms. Dava had been ordered to use every scan she possessed, to look over the tangled mess of metal, which covered the floor below them.

“We can easily survive that kind of drop.” Someone said.

“Keep scanning, use spells where you need to.” Said Delmus. “Be certain what we're jumping down into, before we're committed to that course of action.”

She'd never thought of Delmus as a particularly good teacher, but he was now in his element. They were involved in a battle, even if it was a battle at a very slow pace. Delmus had probably kept some of them alive, by insisting on several thorough scans. Her spell showed a slight green tint, where there shouldn't be one.

“Floor top right, behind the wrecked junction box.” Said Dava. “I'm picking up a high radiation emitter and something.... Yes, something corrosive.”

“I have it too.”

It took a few readings from each of them, to finally decided there was a fission weapon of some kind below them, probably set as a trap.

“A chemical agent too, probably highly toxic and corrosive.” Said Delmus.

“If we didn’t trigger the nuke, the chemical agent would get us.” Said Trey.

And destroy what was left of the stairs. It was a crude plan by their enemy, but an effective one. Dava shuddered; think of what they might well have jumped into.

“We need another way off these stairs.... Think people.” Said Delmus.

Lots of confused faces and Delmus didn’t give them long to think it over. He banged on the metal wall behind them, making it ring.

“Thick and strong, but hollow.” He said. “There is probably a passage on the other side of this wall. Work out a safe proximity setting and use a few shaped charges. No blowing up our only set of stairs. Get to it; we can’t give them a chance to set more traps.”

Dava had done it all before, in practise with live charges and simulations. Real warfare was different though and Chlo wasn’t there to correct their errors. Three of them quickly set shaped charges against the wall, leaving Dava to check them and set a timer. Her hand actually began to tremble, as she saw the misplaced charge. It was the wrong way round, almost guaranteed to blow apart more of their precious staircase.

“Is there a problem ?” Asked Delmus.

Too far away to see what she was looking at, she quickly turned the charge and felt the reassuring thud, as it clung to the wall. There was no point in starting trouble about what might have happened, they were all fresh out of training.

“No problem, setting timer.” She called.

She was another hundred feet back up the stairs, huddled with the others, before the charges went off. No huge bang, more of a pop in the thick alien atmosphere. A little smoke and green flame, which quickly went up the wrecked staircase, heading towards the surface.

“We need to keep on the move now.” Said Delmus. “Fight and move, fight and move.”

“What are we looking for ?” She asked.

“Anything interesting, anything worth blowing up.”

Delmus patted his RM9, as though it was a favourite pet that needed feeding. The charges had worked, creating a hole which led into a wide corridor. The edges of the blast were still hot, she felt heat against her cheek.

“Here they come, about six of them.” Someone shouted.

Still humans, but these were in titanium atmosphere suits, the kind worn by warriors on planets like Algaria. They were better at using their blasters too, one hitting her, though the blaster only caused some minor pain. Soon they were surrounded by dead humans, most carrying an ID, which said they’d recently worked for Chelac Nurigen.

“Do we go left or right ?” Trey asked Delmus.

“Left takes us towards that fission trap.” She said. “Right sounds good.”

Delmus was grinning at her, while he led everyone to their right and down the corridor.

“Sounds good for what ?” Trey asked her.

“For finding something worth blowing up of course.” She replied.

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